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Aristie Trendel

- 1 John Updike's short story "His Mother Inside Him" (*The Afterlife*) along with two other stories "The Sandstone Farmhouse" (*The Afterlife*) and "The Cats" (*Licks of Love*) is the author's short trilogy on mourning. "His Mother Inside Him", a relatively short but very dense story, features a son solely and exclusively preoccupied by his dead mother. If "The Sandstone Farmhouse" was a tentative working over, "His Mother Inside Him" is a tentative mourning which turns out to be a titanic task against a besetting, haunting mother. In a way, the story picks up the narrative thread where "The Sandstone Farmhouse" left it off. The mother's death no longer seems a recent event but it is still the main determinant of the filial psychical reality which prolongs the lost object. The most vivid mental picture on the son's cinematic screen is the mother-son's matrimonial parade "in and out of hospitals" pointing back to the "Sandstone Farmhouse". Yet the maternal symbol—the house—has been removed and mother and son find themselves in a naked showdown without the mediating sheltering space. Indeed, the splitting of imago into a good and bad mother which had moved towards integration in "The Sandstone Farmhouse", forcefully returns in "His Mother Inside Him". The male character is a return, too, of a previous character, Allen Dow. Thus the story also establishes, in a more direct way, a dialogue with the tormented universe of "Flight" (*Pigeon Feathers*). A summary provides the temporal link between the two short stories separated by four decades: "It took him decades of living hundreds of miles beyond her reach to begin to breathe, to sleep, and to speak normally"(234). The mother's vision on the Shale Hill in "Flight" is mentioned in "His Mother Inside Him" as irrefutable evidence of the mother's making of the son which was only implied in the former story. Indeed, "His Mother Inside Him" states in a forthright way what the other stories have suggested all along, the fixation on the mother, which has opened the way to "the reversibility" of time, that is to

regression. "The Mother Inside Him" can be read as a story of refusal of the mother's loss, of unaccomplished mourning and regression.

- 2 If "The Sandstone Farmhouse" overflowed with the son's memories of the mother and established a remembering ego, "His Mother Inside Him" depicts the fusion of filial and maternal images and deals with a specular ego: "Allen's mother had implanted him with a set of images that entwined, flourishing and fading, among those he had acquired with his own senses." (236). Lacan's concept of the imaginary, one of the three registers in the psychoanalytic field along with the symbolic and the real, is relevant here. Allen Dow stands in front of the mirror trying to assess the extent of his resemblance to his mother; the similarities of form lead him back to those images, component parts of his identity. Indeed, if those model images spring from the mother, the story, a third-person narrative, further proves this point through a confusion and interchangeability of the personal pronouns, he and she and the proper and common nouns, Allen and his mother: "she had turned to nature for comfort, and now as he aged, the vast restless natural presence (...) pressed upon him (...) His mother had had a nature-lover's hatred of smoking and drinking and Allen had relinquished both habits years ago" (239). Identification seems to be an on-going, never-ending process: "all of Allen's ideas came from her, save the male boyish idea of *getting away*, of getting out into unheated, unmediated space. Even that, in truth, had been her idea"; (238). Refuting serves only to assert more forcefully the dialectics of desire as the adjective "unheated" suggests. The son's space is the mother's heated, mediated space. Furthermore, the story relates the reiterative motif of the son as the mother's knight to the Lacanian register: "When his mother died he became the sole custodian of hundreds of small mental pictures" (237). The identification with the mother seems to ensure her survival. The son's ultimate mission becomes her revival through him. The passage from images to signs and thus from the imaginary to the symbolic is carried out by the same syntax and the same metaphor: "when she died he became custodian of specialised semiotics, a thousand tiny nuanced understandings of her, a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker" (237). Indeed, the story is structured on "those specialised semiotics", the signs and symbols of the unconscious.
- 3 The title of the story, a phrase also to be found in the story, evokes "the infant's first object relation, the relation to the mother's breast and to the mother" according to Melanie Klein¹. The term "custodian", quoted above, twice repeated in the story, indicates this reversal of roles. There is no need for the house in this story. The son himself has become the house to accommodate the mother. The story successively deals with these two processes that make the accommodation possible—introjection and incorporation. Although they have often been treated as synonymous, their difference lies in the fact that the latter term implies a crossing over the corporeal limit. Both processes have ambivalence in common.
- 4 Indeed affective ambivalence permeates the whole story which starts with an overview of mother's and son's life in terms of affects. An unhappy, tortured, torturing mother, a Fury, a Maenad, a bellicose Amazon and a worshipping, terrified phobic son, point back again to some Ishtar-Tammouz-like mythic couple. An overview of six decades retrieves a single, telling event: "his father cowering under the dining table while his mother, red-faced with fury, tried to get at him to slap him again". (234). The father figure, weak and pathetic in other stories, here shrinks to a frightful powerlessness which has rendered the son unforgiving towards the mother, perplexed after her death and resentful of his

resemblance to her which the others point out to him. Embarking on an examination of this resemblance, the son finds himself at grips with his introjected mother: "It surprised him, unpleasantly, when his mother's laugh, its unmistakable sly cry and shy trailing-off, came out of his mouth"(236). In the rising scale of emotions, it is not the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres that is heard but once again the Empedoclean hate, *neikos*, "within him his mother was battling his mother"(237). Ambivalence is not only suggested but clearly stated: "Or, rather, he felt about land, as about his mother, ambivalent, she having planted in him the idea that the land was sacred, a piece of Mother Earth, endlessly valuable"(237). As in "Home"(*Pigeon Feathers*), the mother becomes synonymous with the land, endlessly valuable, too, turned into the idealised Great Goddess whose image is implied in some of the stories about mother and son. As in "Museums and Women" (*Museums And Women*), the compulsion to repeat originates from the fixation on the mother: "It seemed to be his circular fate to settle one woman after another on a sizeable property and then move on, momentarily free, until the next female real-estate developer locked him into her plans". (237). The mother features both as a shelter-provider and a prison-keeper, representing both security and suffocation.

- 5 What in fact provokes this unhindered statement of ambivalence? It seems to be the loss of the love-object. If the mother's loss triggered the free flow of memories in "The Sandstone Farmhouse", in "His Mother Inside Him" it allows for signs of ambivalence to take over the story. Affective ambivalence is typical of mourning whose task is to liberate the ego from the cathected lost object. Freud drew a comparison between normal states of mourning and melancholia which, like mourning, ensues from the loss of the loved object. He made a correlation between the two states based on the similarities of the two conditions, that is dejection, lack of interest in the outside world, cessation of activity and loss of capacity to love. The character in the story is endowed with manifest, melancholic traits which point to a melancholic disposition: "She made him nervous, and nervousness became his mode. All the complaints of nervousness –skin rashes, stammering, asthma, insomnia–were his."(234). It comes as no surprise that after her death the world becomes a waste land and he the disconsolate ghost of the void: "He wandered a world without features, just grass and sky, as in Brazil's Mato Gross, the last of his tribe". (240). The lack of interest in the outside world is rationalised: "sirens grown faint and hoarse with age"(240). It is viewed as a result of age. This impoverishment of the world is accompanied by an impoverishment of the ego: "as the sun grew higher an emptiness from within was too sharp, too persistent"(241). The disturbance of self-regard absent in mourning, seems present, too, in "the sensation that his life was too *small*" (241), which reveals a sense of inferiority through the polysemy of small, highlighted in the text by the italics. After these considerations the most salient feature in the story, its ambivalence, could be better understood. Moreover, ambivalence pushes back the melancholic's erotic cathexis to the stage of sadism. The reader has been prepared for this: "The women who drew close to him in the course of his life tended to suffer, and it took no great insight of his to imagine why his heart was, in regard to their sufferings, rather aloof and cool, if not faintly exultant"(234). Affective ambivalence is not only typical of mourning but also of the oral cannibalistic phase of libidinal development. It is quite interesting that Karl Abraham suggested a connection between melancholia and that oral stage. In a melancholic state, the libido seems to regress to that phase and the melancholic wants to incorporate his object of desire.

- 6 There is one element missing in the story from the clinical picture of melancholia, the refusal to eat, anorexia. On the contrary, the reverse eating disorder appears, bulimia, which is also a manifestation of a depressive state:

Hungry—he could not stop eating. After a full dinner, while his wife loaded the dishwasher, he would rummage rather frantically in the breadbox and the cupboards, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, and stuff his mouth with cookies, peanuts, raisins (240).

- 7 The fear of being without shelter which was manifested in the story - “where would he have lived, but for these landed women? On the streets? In the trees?”(237) - is succeeded, after the mother's death, by the fear of starvation which points to the original fusion of hunger and love.
- 8 The Lacanian register of the real points here to the food in the mouth, a substitute for the mother's breast. Indeed, eating is presented in the story as “an act of memorisation”(240) and food is described sensually and exaltedly:

Food, all the other sirens having grown faint and hoarse with age, now sang to him penetratingly—the edginess of food; the friability; the saltiness or sweetness of it in the ardent moment of first contact with his membranes. (240).

- 9 The way the character relates to food reveals the erogenous significance of the mouth. Food, then, becomes the ultimate, perilous siren that has the faculty of stirring memory to an unknown loss. The same plight has been set for the mother: “Sometimes, when he thought back on it, it had been *she* who was going to the doctor, for female reasons that belonged to the dark subterrain of her unhappiness”. (238). Mother and son are united by the same sense of loss. Eating, originating in the process of identification, unearths the process of incorporation.

- 10 Karl Abraham has drawn six phases of libidinal development in his history of object love. The oral cannibalistic phase in fact succeeds the earliest precocious oral phase which is pre-ambivalent and auto-erotic. Indeed, as Abraham states, the melancholic cannot escape his ambivalence which claims the destruction of the love object: “the ruminative pulverising and liquefying and incorporating of it.” (240) in the narrator's own words. It is accompanied by the nostalgia of the earliest phase whose instinctual aim is suction. The story is laced with nostalgia all the more striking in the middle of inner strife: “His mother would have known; she would have shared with him the vanished texture of this lost world.” (240). The sibilant lament of the disconsolate son reaches the reader here. Melanie Klein also speaks of the nostalgia of the love object, a component part of her depressive position, where defence and nostalgia stand side by side.

- 11 When this position is related to mourning, Klein states, it entails the danger of an inner break-up. The panic that the character experiences at the ending of the story suggests internal rupture and regression:

As the last of a jar of sugared peanuts... disappeared into his insides, smothering the suppressed panic there—not so much the fear of death as the sensation that his life was too *small*—he smiled to think that his mother reached this point at the age of thirty, whereas he was all of sixty. As they tell you in seventh-grade health class, girls develop more rapidly than boys. (241).

- 12 Updike chooses to end “His Mother Inside Him” with a flash of irony, a master stroke sealing the destiny of the character and the density of the story since “no other form of human communication does so with such speed and economy” as Wayne Booth says about irony². If “The Sandstone Farmhouse” was marked by expansiveness, “His Mother

"Inside Him" is marked by compactness. The irony targets both mother and son and points to the beginning of the story which tackles the question of the mother's unhappiness introjected by the son. Like "Ace in the Hole" (*The Same Door*), then, "His Mother Inside Him" has a circular structure suggesting the son's "circular fate"(237) back to his infantile love implied at the end of the story: "Eating was a way, his only remaining way, of intersecting with the world."(241). The *puer aeternus* motive has been pushed to the extreme, correlating with the castrating mother who armed like Zeus with a thunder-like temper "flattened the other occupants of the house" (234). Thus irony, the hall mark of Updike's style, becomes the communicating vessel which contains literature and psychoanalysis, whose collaboration some critics deny.

- 13 It is precisely the son's maturity which is questioned at the ending of the story and could remind the reader of the character's self irony in *Of The Farm*: "I've always felt young for my age". As "The Sandstone Farmhouse" suggested a return to the uterus, "His Mother Inside Him" suggests a return to the breast. "We are all the result of sexual events, and their faded heat still warms us"(236), says the narrator in Updike's aphoristic turn of style. The sexual event suggested in the story is an infantile kind of satisfaction in a past where the character has been anchored.
- 14 If the hole, then, is a symbol of genital love in Updike's stories, the mouth in "His Mother Inside Him", an image of the hole as the first erogenous zone, becomes a symbol of pre-genital love. Furthermore, if the earliest stories about mother and son were built on repression, "His Mother Inside Him" is built on regression. Both repression and regression indicate an inner temporality which disregards the external one. The story anticipates the third part of Updike's trilogy on mourning, "The Cats", a story built on projection which is another modality of object relation. Updike fathoms in these stories the depth of the unconscious which becomes the invisible character in the wings of the text. Psychoanalysis is a tool to detect and tackle this powerful guest star which only the reader could bring in the spotlight.

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NOTES

1. . "If this primal object which is introjected, takes root in the ego with relative security, the basis for a satisfactory development is laid.

The good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself."(*Envy and Gratitude* p. 3)

2. . Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 13.

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle de John Updike "Sa mère en lui" explore l'amour d'objet basé sur l'ambivalence. L'amour filial pour la mère est examiné à travers les quatre concepts psychanalytiques de l'identification, l'introjection, l'incorporation et la régression, mis en évidence par l'état de deuil et de mélancolie. Au fur et à mesure que le chagrin augmente, le fils régresse au stade infantile. Cette interprétation utilise les travaux de Freud, Abraham, Klein et Lacan et préconise la collaboration entre la psychanalyse et la littérature pour appréhender cette nouvelle dénuée d'intrigue, où toute l'action est psychique.

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